

Moral Health

Sunday, 31 May 2009

Men In Power: Equality in a New Key at the University of Chicago

Filed under: [Articles](#) — Laurence Thomas @ 14:03 [Edit This](#)

TO SOME PEOPLE the very idea that men might be in need of a support-group is none other than an oxymoron. For on this view, it is something akin to a law of the universe that men cannot be the victims of injustice, that they cannot be unfairly criticized, that their sense of worth cannot be unduly threatened, and so on. From the fact that men have been sexist, what is supposed to follow somehow is that women and only women can be wronged.

First of all, even we allow for the sake of argument that all men have been sexist, what is surely false is that all men have been equally sexist. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, from the fact that women have been the victims of sexism what simply does not follow by any stretch of the imagination is that women have not committed, and cannot commit, egregious moral wrongs against either women or men.

In other words, being a victim of systemic wrongdoing does not thereby entail that one is a morally righteous individual. Quite the contrary, being a victim of wrongdoing is compatible with being quite malicious.

In the city of Chicago, for example, we know that of late some of the most vicious crimes against minorities—minority children, in fact—have been committed by other minority individuals. No account of racism will explain, let alone justify, such behavior on the part of any minority person.

In custody battles, women have falsely and—need I add—viciously accused the man whom they are divorcing of sexually abusing their children. No account of sexism will justify such bile-filled accusations on the part of any woman.

The University of Chicago group **MEN IN POWER** can be seen as none other than a response to the reality that injustices against men are common enough. The group need

not be understood, as some radical feminists might suppose, as an attempt to return to an era when, as the saying goes, women were “kept barefoot and pregnant”. Rather, the impulse by the group can simply be that the equality of women should not be at the expense of the equality of men.

This line of thought is not as implausible as one might initially suppose.

One very untoward consequence of both feminism and diversity is the sentiment that any criticism of a woman by a man or of a minority by a white is somehow motivated by sexism or racism, respectively. So prevalent is this line of thought that the substance of a person’s criticisms have very nearly become irrelevant.

For instance, a white professor has to contend with the charge of racism if she or he should correct a minority student’s grammar. Or a male professor has to contend with the charge of sexism because a female student became uncomfortable with the way in which he discussed rape. Never mind that he roundly and unquestionably condemned rape. It is just that she somehow felt uncomfortable with the way he approached the subject.

Indeed, the criticism that a female student made of me is that I did not give sufficient warning that I was doing to talk about date-rape—not that I had say anything inappropriate, but that I did not give sufficient warning that I would be addressing the issue. That charge might have had at least the ring of plausibility to it were I teaching a mathematics class. Precisely what I teach, however, is a class that discusses contemporary moral problems. The right question from a student would be all that it would take to address the issue of date-rape.

As for date-rape itself: Everyone knows that it is normally through non-verbal cues that sex takes place between a woman and a man—and not via some contract as Antioch College had once supposed. Yet, we all know that there are men who have found themselves charged with date-rape when they had every reason to think that they had engaged in perfectly consensual sex. It is, to be sure, true that the woman in question did not verbally

agree to have sex with the man in question. But as I have just noted: Verbal agreements are simply not a typical part of the moment if only because that discussion characteristically gets in the way of the moment. Young women have made that charge to protect their familial standing after a night of slutty behavior. And yes: I deliberately used that word. Yet as we all know, the mere charge of date-rape tends to be damaging even if in the end the charge deemed to be without warrant.

Here is a most poignant observation: A female can truthfully claim that she *felt* as if she were raped when in point of fact what happened does not amount to rape at all. A woman can say “He took advantage of me when I was drunk”, although the man had every reason to think that they were getting drunk together and, besides, she was all over him.

No sensible person can deny that there is sexism. Alas, that truth does not preclude the despicable truth that, notwithstanding sexism, women can do quite malicious things.

If the group **MEN IN POWER** is none other than a response to this reality, then its existence already has considerable merit.

At the risk of sounding utterly naïve, whatever equality means, it does not mean that one replaces one evil with another evil. Nor, again, does it mean that if men once unfairly passed over women, then it is morally permissible or even required for women to pass unfairly over men. So once again: if **MEN IN POWER** is taking a stand against this nonsense, then it is doing something absolutely appropriate.

Now, in some of the comments to the Chicago Tribune article about the group, some individuals accused members of the group of being insecure. Well, let me ask: Since when has pursuing justice on one’s behalf a sign of insecurity? The charge of insecurity only makes sense if one supposes that the very existence of sexism precludes the reality of anyone wrongdoing against men. And that assumption has always been false; and it is more false now than ever before. This is so—not because the world is perfect for women. Rather, it is so because all sorts of allegations by women are taken seriously nowadays, however implausible, whereas such allegations were not taken seriously in the past. One does not have to trivialize the reality of date-rape in order to recognize the truth that there are teenage females who use that charge to their advantage. A like point holds for racism.

Finally, there are matters worth discussing among men that have nothing to do with women. One of these is the following: How should we understand masculinity in a world that is accepting of homosexuality? After all, just as gays can be offended when their homosexuality is not accepted by straight men, it is also true that straight men can be offended when their heterosexuality is not accepted by gay men. The increase in social categories requires increasingly greater precision regarding what the boundaries are. Far from being narcissistic or bemoaning losses, such discussions by men are very pertinent to moral and social progress.

To conclude, then: The issue is not whether the members of MEN IN POWER are flawless in their moral character. There is no organization whose members meet that requirement. Nor, again, is the issue whether men generally are flawless in their moral character. For there is no group of people, however they might define themselves, who meet that morally elevated condition. It suffices that there are substantive moral issues that affect men as such, and which it would be useful for men to wrestle with collectively. If this is right, then the charge that MEN IN POWER bespeaks an insecurity on the part of men the group is none other than a sign of moral depravity on the part of those who make it.

In this world, a group of men or whites claiming, respectively, to address the wrongs of men or whites is readily and unthinkingly seen as a form of consciousness-raising in an unjust society. At the very least, the formation of the group MEN IN POWER can be seen as an act of marvelous moral courage; for these men are daring to speak for themselves in a moral and social climate in which few, if any, are inclined to speak on their behalf and a social climate in which far too many think that men have no right at all to speak for themselves. If my memory serves me correctly, there is a term for this line of thought: *oppressive*.

©Laurence Thomas 2009